

Dinner for Four by [pathvain_aelien](#)

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Summary:

The sequel to Paper Hearts.

Dinner for Four

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For AliKattt, who gave me the push I needed to finish this fic.

Mike is a careful, diligent student.

Most of the time, anyway.

When the subject interests him.

He maintains an A average, but his dedication to the material varies. He usually studies ahead of schedule for his favorite classes. The classes that are a little more boring usually get the procrastination treatment, where he will study like mad the night before a test. It all works out, so it doesn't really matter. But for his favorite subjects, the really interesting subjects, he's careful and diligent.

And it doesn't always apply strictly to homework.

Not at all, in fact. He's always happy spending hours and hours (and even more hours) writing grand campaigns. Because the subject interests him. A lot. More than his parents are comfortable with, he assumes, considering that his mom is always complaining that he's neglecting his homework in favor of a game. Mike just lets the criticism roll right off of him, though, because he's already making straight A's-it's not like there's much room for improvement.

Anyway.

Mike shakes off this train of thought, commending himself nobly for his diligence and care. Reminding himself. Reminding progresses to scolding, but that doesn't work, either. His feet remain firmly planted in front of the restaurant and he's beginning to attract attention because shit he's been standing out here for at least five minutes, gaping like an idiot. Possibly even muttering encouragement to himself, who knows?

Careful. Diligent. Industrious. Meticulous.

His mind has evidently become a thesaurus, but he doesn't care. Whatever gets him through the damned door. He repeats helpful synonyms to himself and takes a couple of steps forward.

There. Progress.

The door swings open the moment he lunges for it and he collides with a waitress. She's evidently stepped out for a smoke break, because she already has one at the ready. Had, anyway. It drops from her fingers as he smacks into her and rolls out into the street. Mike hastily darts for it and hands it back to her. It's a little damp and dirty, but he figures it can't really hurt, considering the contents.

"Sorry."

The waitress gives him a dirty look and yanks the cigarette away from him, which is a little much, in Mike's opinion. He did apologize, after all. Jesus. He repeats the apology and waits, but she's still glaring at him. He gives up and squeezes past her into the restaurant, which is mostly empty because it's only 3:45 and Mike figures only really, really old people eat dinner that early.

Mike waits patiently at the front, because the placard in front of him tells him to.

Please wait for your server to seat you. Thank you!

He gets antsy pretty quickly, because he doesn't need to be seated, thank you. He gives it a few more seconds before stepping one foot over the line into the dining room, and the host immediately appears as if he's been waiting for Mike to break the rules. Whatever.

"Good evening, young sir," the host says with an ingratiating smile. Mike stares at him in shock, because the pomposity is overwhelming. The accent is overwhelming, too. Why does he have a French accent? It's an Italian restaurant. And it isn't technically evening yet, either, but he wisely decides not to correct him.

"Um. Hi. Can I see a menu, please?"

"Of course! But how many will be dining with you this evening?" The host is already gathering a stack of menus in preparation.

"None. No one, I mean."

The man falters and practically droops with disappointment.

"Your parents won't be joining you?"

"I won't even be joining me," Mike answers, inanely. The man—Anthony, according to the pin on his lapel—stares at him in bewilderment. Mike doesn't even blame him, because that was pretty fucking lame.

"Pardon?"

"I mean, I'm not actually eating. Here."

Anthony looks like he's about a second away from another Pardon so Mike forestalls him. "I mean, I'm not eating here tonight. But I'd like to see a menu. So I can eat here, this weekend."

The pomposity (and the ingratiating smile) departs immediately, since Anthony's finally realized that adults and their fat wallets won't be joining him. Anthony hands him a menu without even looking at him, but Mike doesn't care. He accepts the menu happily.

"Thanks."

"No problem," Anthony answers, and Mike isn't too surprised to hear that Anthony's as American as he is. The accent must bring in tips. Mike takes note of this in case he ever works as a waiter later in life.

Mike opens the menu and feels Anthony's eyes on him. He glances up before even reading the appetizers.

"Oh. I'm not like, going to steal it, or anything," Mike says, since Anthony's gaze is pretty intense. Anthony smiles a little.

"I didn't think you were, and besides, I know where you live."

Mike stares at him, surprised. "That sounds a little ominous."

“I mean, I know your sister.”

Ah. Every guy over the age of 10 seems to know Nancy these days.

“Oh.”

“She still dating Byers?”

Mike’s finding it hard to read the menu, because he can’t think about food when he’s so nauseous. “Yep.” Mercifully, Anthony ceases to question him about Nancy’s dates, hopes, and dreams. He really hates when that happens.

“Ah. Your family eating here this weekend?”

“Um, no. Just me.”

“By yourself?”

Mike scoffs. “No, not by myself.”

Anthony’s interest seems piqued and Jesus, can’t he just get a few minutes with the menu in peace? Would that really be too much to ask?

“Hot date?”

Mike’s glare is answer enough. Anthony laughs but sobers quickly when the door opens. An elderly couple-very elderly-amble in slowly. The ingratiating smile emerges again but he claps Mike on the back before he focuses his attention on the couple.

“Good for you. Study away.”

Finally.

Mike sits on the mahogany bench near the door and opens the menu again, perusing it both carefully and diligently.

The menu isn’t anything new, because he’s eaten here for every special occasion since he could actually eat. But it’s new in a way, because he never even glanced at the prices before. His dad always

foots the bill so it didn't seem important. Considering his funds (lack of funds) it's pretty goddamn important now.

Okay. They'll probably both get soda, because she likes coke now. And an appetizer, because that's the best part. He immediately dismisses the calamari and other appetizers he deems as too weird, because he doesn't think El will want them, either. He chooses the most expensive possible option left and calculates that along with two cokes. Even that is more than he actually has right now, but he doesn't dwell on it. He'll figure it out. No problem.

He usually gets the chicken alfredo or the steak, so his eyes skip to that side of the menu and Jesus Christ, how much does his dad make, anyway? A restaurant steak is three times more expensive than a fucking package of steaks at the Big Buy. Mike ponders this injustice for a few seconds before attempting to refocus.

No steak for him, no fucking way. But it's the most expensive option on the menu, so he does some quick mental calculation and adds it to everything else, just in case. He adds the cheaper chicken alfredo (why is it cheaper? It tastes way better than the steak and then you have leftovers!) and scans the dessert menu, because they always get dessert. And Eleven loves dessert almost as much as she loves Eggos.

Once he has a rough total in mind (and he's calculated a tip, too) he hands the menu back to Anthony. Anthony takes one look at his white face and shaking fingers and laughs, not unkindly.

"Guess you need to mow some lawns before this weekend," he says, helpfully enough. "Don't forget to tip."

Mike gives him a wan smile and exits the restaurant, more defeated than he'd like to admit. He rallies his spirits. He has a few days. He has time to figure this out. A careful and diligent student can solve any problem with enough dedication. No problem.

No problem is what he tells himself the next day (Wednesday, a mere three days before the date) at lunch, when he pockets his generous lunch allowance and watches his friends eat, instead of eating himself. Only Will seems to realize that "not hungry" means "I am freaking the fuck out and will soon be digging through the couch for

coins” and he takes pity on him by giving him his fries.

Mike accepts them gratefully, adding the total he can accumulate by not eating this week and realizing it still falls short. Fuck. But no problem. Anthony’s throwaway remark comes back to him. Mow some lawns. He can do that. No problem.

Slight problem, actually, but he doesn’t even consider it before embarking on his mission after school. He starts with Mr. Clarke, because Mr. Clarke is awesome.

“Hi, Mr. Clarke.”

“Michael! Hi. What can I do for you?”

Mike considers a can-do attitude, complete with peppy sales pitch. It’s about what I can do for you, or something, but even thinking about Eleven can’t overcome his revulsion for that irritating sentence.

“Can I mow your lawn?” He asks abruptly.

Mike follows Mr. Clarke’s gaze as it wanders over his yard. It’s pristine, a beautiful uniform white thanks to the recent snowfall. There isn’t even an iota of green showing through the blanket of snow. Mike blushes. Idiot. He amends his question as gamely as possible.

“Um. I mean, can I shovel your sidewalk?”

Mr. Clarke laughs, but it’s not a mean laugh. “A little low on funds this week?”

Mike drags one foot through the snow, then back. “Something like that.”

“Hitting the arcade this weekend?”

“Uh, no. Well, yeah, probably. But, you know. I sort of have, you know.” Mike trails off without finishing the sentence, but Mr. Clarke smiles at him.

“I guess I do know,” he says, eyes twinkling. “I’ll get the shovel out of

the garage for you.”

It doesn't take long, because Mr. Clarke shoveled the driveway himself this morning before leaving for school. Mr. Clarke doesn't mention this when he pays Mike, a generous amount that doesn't completely fix his problem but does go a long way towards covering his debt. Mike beams at him as he stuffs the bills in his pocket and makes a mental note to shovel Mr. Clarke's driveway at least once a week until spring in repayment for this largesse.

Mike's a careful and diligent student, but his free time for the next couple of days is entirely spent on menial labor. He doesn't waste any time. He walks directly down Mr. Clarke's neatly shoveled driveway and trudges up the driveway of his nearest neighbor. He doesn't make nearly as much from this job, but every bit counts. After that, he's obsessed. And he gets pretty good results, actually. Not everyone wants their driveway shoveled, but everyone does have something in common. They all have unpleasant tasks they'd rather foist off on a willing kid than undertake themselves.

He does the grocery shopping for his elderly neighbor (not the special kind of shopping he does for his own mother, because a. she's old, and b. he's getting paid), he does some of Dustin's chores at the Henderson's because Dustin doesn't feel like doing them and he has a surfeit of funds this week. This “job” is particularly annoying, because Dustin calls him on the super-comm every single time Tews visits the litter box. Which is pretty goddamned frequently. He's remorseful for insisting on giving El four cats, because the majority of her day must be spent cleaning up after them. Unless Tews is just abnormal? Well, he's remorseful until the next time he calls her because he learns that she simply levitates the waste straight into the trash. Not for the first time, he's a little envious of her power. Especially at ten pm on Wednesday night, when he's getting ready for bed and Dustin's cheerful voice crackles from the super-comm on his dresser.

“Mike. You copy? Over.”

“I copy. Go ahead. Over.”

“Tews just defecated. Repeat, Tews just defecated. Over.”

“Dustin. It’s late. Over.”

Dustin doesn’t immediately respond, although there’s a weird shuffling sound coming from his side of the transmission.

“What the hell is that? Over.”

“That’s me, fanning bills. Dollar bills. Dollar bills that could become YOUR dollar bills, if you move your ass.”

There’s a pause before Mike replies, and Dustin savors it.

“How many dollar bills? Over.”

“Let me put it this way. Mom put Tews on a new diet and it did not agree with her.”

Mike’s eye twitches but he swings his legs out of bed, anyway. “Heading that way. Over and out.”

He hounds his own parents for chores, until his mom tells him, pleasantly enough, that he’s already assigned chores and he has neglected to complete any of them this week. He beats a hasty retreat, because he doesn’t have time for unpaid chores right now.

He counts his stash Thursday after school, but he’s still a little short. A tiny, stupid, meaningless amount, but still short. Which means it’s not actually meaningless, Mike guesses, but he doesn’t give a shit. He’s tired and in a foul mood, El even told him he sounded cranky when they were on the phone earlier.

Like Hopper, in other words.

It didn’t improve his outlook in the slightest, but it did make him more determined to come up with the rest of the cash.

He desperately scrounges under the cushions both upstairs and in the basement and finds an impressive 29 cents as well as a cheeto that looks like it has seen better days.

Nice.

He shoves the desiccated Cheeto back under the cushion and adds the change to his piggy bank, before dumping the entire contents on his bed. It turns out to be a pointless endeavor, because that only gives him 29 fucking cents. Maybe even less, actually, because one of the nickels looks distinctly Canadian. He irritably tosses the change (both American and foreign) into a shoe box with the rest of his stash.

Maybe he should spend a little less time at the arcade in the future.

Mike shoves the box back under his bed when Nancy opens the door. "What?" He asks it a little more aggressively than he intended. Nancy rolls her eyes.

"Phone call."

Mike stands up, brushing his hair out of his eyes. "El?" It's a reasonable assumption, even though they already spoke today, because no one else calls him on a telephone. Although even Eleven usually uses her super-comm these days.

"No, it's Mr. Keene," Nancy corrects as he pushes past her in the doorway.

Mike falters in the hallway.

"Um...what?"

"Mr. Keene? The guy that lives across from the Henderson's?"

"I know who Mr. Keene is." And he has a sneaking suspicion that he knows why Mr. Keene would be calling him right now. Mr. Keene is a nice old guy. He makes awesome cookies. He's friends with Claudia Henderson. He broke his hip last week when one of his cats tripped him on the stairs. And the most relevant thing he knows about Mr. Keene is that he has at least twice the number of cats that Eleven currently owns.

"Okay. Apparently Dustin told him you could help him out. Something about cleaning up after the cats?"

Resigned, Mike grabs a pair of gloves (encased in a plastic baggie for hygienic reasons) and stows it in his backpack.

“Don’t ask,” he mutters to a bemused Nancy. The second he’s out of eyesight, Nancy peeks under his bed and investigates the contents of the shoebox. It’s not really prying, because she’s the older sibling and such is her right. There’s a tidy wad of cash, a handful of change, and a hastily scribbled note with menu prices. She’s oddly proud of her little brother for actually trying to earn the money (and in a pretty horrific way) instead of asking her or just helping himself to her own stash. Which is why she doesn’t mind making a small contribution, at least this once.

A visibly shaken Mike returns an hour later. He refuses dinner and jumps straight in the shower instead and Nancy really does not need any more details than that. After making a brief trip into his room to add to his stash, he opens Nancy’s door without knocking. He’s holding a ten dollar bill in one hand.

“Thank you. I owe you. Whatever you want.” And he means it. He really, really means it, because now he has more than enough, even figuring in tax and tip. Nancy turns a page in her book without looking at him.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Um...okay. But thank you, anyway. For that thing you know nothing about.”

“You’re welcome.”

Mike is set. He can enjoy the remainder of the week without worrying about anything except not making an ass out of himself on Saturday. Except that he can’t, because he’s been so careful and diligent about the goddamn financial aspect that he’s forgotten something almost as important.

Hopper.

Hopper’s inclined to say no to Mike’s request, to the surprise of absolutely no one. It’s not because he’s an asshole, or because he

thinks they're too young for an official date. He's officially Eleven's father now, but he's not worried about the usual fatherly things when faced with such a request. He isn't worried about Mike, or Eleven going out with a teenage boy. That's a normal dad problem and he's definitely not a normal dad. Because she isn't a normal girl. He grudgingly allows her out with her friends, even in public places, because those places are also frequented mainly by kids their own age and very few adults. Angelo's is different. Kids only eat there when they're dragged there by their parents. A couple of kids eating there alone will stand out. They'll be noticed by every single person, and some of those people are very familiar with the Russian girl conspiracy.

Well, he's a little worried about Mike.

But Mike isn't the main factor. It's Eleven's visibility toward the wrong people. So he's inclined to say no, but it's a little difficult when he's being ambushed by nearly everyone in his social circle. He tries to explain his position but he's met with either hostile glares or mutinous faces. Or both. Only Eleven is ignoring him, because she's already thrown a tantrum and accidentally broke her super-comm. Also a couple of lamps. And she's angry with him for that, too.

"Look, I understand. I really do. But you guys would stand out too much."

Silence.

"Why don't you have your...date...somewhere else? With fewer adults?" And that particular sentence, he thinks, should prove to everyone that he isn't an overprotective dad.

Mike heaves a sigh but doesn't respond, because he's already answered this question at least six times. In front of an audience. Hopper's been grilling him on the logistics for at least half an hour and it's somehow both tedious and infuriating. Dustin takes the initiative to speak for him, rather like a lawyer since this whole meeting actually reminds him of one of his favorite movies.

"It's their first date. And it's for Valentine's day."

"I thought the Snow Ball was their first date?" Hopper gives in to this latest lunacy and speaks directly to Dustin, about Mike and Eleven. Jesus.

"That didn't count. We were all there, too."

"But why can't they just go to the arcade? Or something more kid-appropriate?"

"Objection!" Dustin snaps, settling into his new role and envisioning himself in a suit. He pretends to adjust his tie. "The witnesses have already stated their reason."

There's a moment of silence as everyone digests this sudden turn. Dustin allows the silence to spin out, enjoying himself immensely. He's been told he has the gift of persuasion. Possibly because he doesn't mind annoying people until they give in to his various whims. It doesn't matter. If it works, it works. And it must be working, because Lucas and Will are giggling.

"Objection sustained," Lucas says, appointing himself the judge of the proceeding. "Hopper, watch your questioning in the future."

Hopper stares at him blankly. "What the hell are you talking about? And why would you be the judge, anyway?" He shakes his head to clear it because why the hell is he arguing about this? "I have the deciding vote here, I am her legal guardian."

"Objection!"

Hopper presses his hands to his face, dragging the skin downward. Dustin's impressed by the amount of wrinkles that form. And by his look of utter despair. He doesn't think he's ever seen someone look that defeated before. It's great.

"Sustained," Lucas utters the word through his snickers.

"You are not a judge. You are a kid. Not an adult, therefore you cannot be a judge. Period."

"Sustained," Joyce says, and Hopper lifts his eyes to hers. She's grinning as if this is the happiest she's been in years. He's pretty sure

she's taking a certain pleasure in his pain.

"You've got to be kidding me."

"Nope. Okay, look. We need to find a compromise here." Joyce is giving him that look, the one that tells him in no uncertain terms that she isn't backing down from this particular fight.

"That's exactly what I have been suggesting," Hopper says through clenched teeth. "A compromise. Meaning that they go to the damned arcade instead of a restaurant."

Mike and Dustin immediately retort, drowning each other out. Joyce raises her hand to shut them both up. "A different compromise. They've already explained to you why that won't work."

"Okay, fine. Why can't they have dinner here?"

Dustin opens his mouth to agree on his friend's behalf, possibly envisioning himself as their waiter. He wisely decides not to suggest this when Mike glares him into silence. There's no way in hell Mike cleaned all of those litter boxes to eat dinner at Hopper's for Valentine's Day.

Hopper sighs. Joyce looks at him sympathetically but she isn't willing to budge. "Okay. So a compromise. Any ideas?"

"A chaperone," Dustin says decisively.

"What? No!" Mike snaps, but Dustin raises one hand to silence him.

"Give me a moment to confer with my client," he mutters to the room, and Mike rolls his eyes.

"I'm not your client. And the whole point of this is-" he cuts off abruptly when Dustin speaks low in his ear.

"Shut up. I know. I've got this. Trust me, okay?"

Mike looks mulish. Dustin tries to send a thought to Eleven, hoping she can hear him and pass the message along. It doesn't seem to be working, because El is sipping a soda and staring off into space. Oh

well. It was worth a shot. After a second, Mike gives a reluctant nod.

“Okay. As I was saying. I’ve put some thought into this, okay? As a backup because I figured you wouldn’t go for it any other way. I think having a chaperone would take care of your concerns, Hop. They wouldn’t stand out that way; they’d be with an adult. Just like every other kid in the building.”

Hopper releases his grip on his face and the wrinkles disappear. Well, most of them. “Don’t call me that,” he says, but he sounds relieved. “Yeah. That would work. That okay with you guys?”

Eleven glances at Mike’s dejected face and squeezes his hand under the table, discreetly. Although Lucas is grinning at them knowingly.

It’s okay.

I know. It’s better than nothing. I was just hoping it could be like, a real date.

No.

No what?

I mean, it’s okay. Dustin has a plan.

Dustin always has a plan. They usually blow.

She doesn’t have the slightest idea what the plan is, but she can tell Dustin has one. He looks utterly relaxed and confident, and she trusts that he knows what he’s doing. He’s Dustin, her friend, after all.

Mike doesn’t get this thought, but he does catch a little of her confidence. Dustin’s confidence. It’s contagious, somehow. Mike puts aside his reservations as best he can and nods his assent.

“Thank Christ. Okay. So we’ll swing by and pick you up at 7, unless you want to bike over.” Mike immediately looks dismayed, and Hopper’s wrinkles reappear. “What now?”

“Not you!” Mike has a nightmarish vision of Hopper sprawled out in a booth across from them, possibly sleeping and only waking up

periodically to glare or eat a breadstick.

“What about me?” Joyce asks, but Mike gives her an embarrassed look she can easily interpret. He’s known her for nearly his whole life and she’s just too much like a second mom.

“I’ve got this figured out, too.” Dustin can’t resist sounding a little superior than the rest of these mere mortals.

“Oh?” Lucas asks skeptically.

“Yep. Steve.”

“Steve?”

“And Nancy.”

There’s a round of objections from every corner of the kitchen, including Joyce.

“Fine. Jonathan and Nancy. Whatever.”

“No way. Not Nancy,” Mike says, because that idea is almost worse than Hopper. Actually, it is worse because she’s Nancy. Even though she’s helped financially, she’s just...too...Nancy.

“FINE. Steve, then. And me.”

“You? No. No way.”

“Yep. Me. Everyone knows we’re friends, everyone knows he’s friends with Nancy and therefore friendly with you, and therefore he won’t attract any attention.” Dustin turns his attention to Hopper. “And as for you,” he says irritably, since he’s no longer enjoying himself, “Steve is an adult. Technically. And he’s responsible.”

Hopper glances at Joyce as they both mull this over. She doesn’t really know Steve. She wasn’t his biggest fan last year, true. Jonathan was arrested and although he never really explained it, she knows Steve was the instigator somehow. But he’s grown up since then, and he’s willingly put himself in danger in order to protect them. Repeatedly. She raises her eyebrows at Hopper and he shrugs.

"My client agrees with your terms," Joyce says. Mike opens his mouth to argue but he's forestalled.

"Shut up, Mike. My client also agrees."

Will's dubious. An 18 year old hanging out with three kids in a fancy (for Hawkins, anyway) restaurant will actually attract more attention than Mike and Eleven alone, in his humble opinion. But if Hopper doesn't notice this flaw in the plan, he's certainly not going to bring it up.

"I'm not paying for you," Mike mutters angrily. Dustin ignores him. He's used to not receiving the gratitude he deserves.

"Great. Okay, Steve will pick us up here, tomorrow at 7."

As Joyce buttons her jacket, she catches Dustin's eye. "That was really nice of Steve, to offer like that."

"Huh?"

"I said, that was really nice of Steve to offer to chaperone."

"Oh. I haven't actually asked him yet."

Hopper checks his watch, resigned. The "trial" didn't last nearly as long as he thought. It's only six, which means two things. Eleven's friends aren't going anywhere. They usually hang out on Fridays and as they're already here, they won't have the incentive to go anywhere else. It's also dinnertime, a fact they're evidently well aware of. He's hungry himself, but that isn't the biggest clue, considering Dustin's helping himself to the phone and ordering a couple of pizzas. Hopper is pretty certain his wallet's going to be involved. He tries to muster some anger and succeeds at feeling only mildly irritated. It's hard to be pissed off when Dustin's holding one hand over the mouthpiece and asking him if he really, truly, still feels the need to have Canadian bacon on his pizza before sighing and removing his hand from the mouthpiece.

“And Canadian bacon on half of that one. Like, exactly half. Please make sure that none of them cross the border onto my side of the pizza. Ha! Get it? Cross the border?” Lucas snickers and Dustin gives him a thumbs-up before sighing. “No? Whatever. Just make sure my half only has sausage and pepperoni. He doesn’t care if his half ends up with sausage and pepperoni, but let me tell you, I definitely care where the Canadian bacon ends up.”

Lucas holds up one hand to get Dustin’s attention and Dustin waves at him in exasperation. “I know, dumb-ass. No, not you. Sorry. And one with anchovies and onions. That one’s a small, by the way. And then a large pepperoni,” Dustin says, looking at Mike, El and Will. “And some garlic knots.”

“I don’t think we need garlic knots,” Hopper says, because there goes an extra \$3.99 from his checking account.

“Mike likes garlic knots.”

“Oh, well if Mike likes them,” Hopper says, rolling his eyes.

“I can’t stay,” Mike says, apologetically.

“Why?” Eleven and Dustin ask immediately. Dustin doesn’t bother to put his hand over the phone this time. “No, I can’t call you back; this will just take a second. Jesus.”

Mike responds to the room at large, but he’s only looking at Eleven. “Sorry. I’ve got to get ready for tomorrow,” he answers briefly, ignoring the giggles from around the kitchen. He doesn’t feel the need to elaborate and explain that he has nothing to wear that is a. appropriate and b. not revolting, because he really doesn’t want Dustin to get any ideas.

“Oh. Okay.”

Dustin waits expectantly for some sort of romantic goodbye, but he’s disappointed. Whatever goodbye they’re sharing, he’s not privy to it. After a few seconds of eye contact, they both smile and Mike waves to the rest of them before leaving without a word. An audible word, anyway. Damn.

“Okay, no garlic knots.”

The second the pizzas arrive, Dustin checks his pizza and sees that only one of his slices has been contaminated by Canadian bacon. It's a vast improvement. He tosses that one onto Hopper's plate and walks it to the table, but Hopper intercepts him.

“I think I'll eat mine in the living room.”

“Why?”

“Because there's something I want to watch on TV, that's why.”

“Maybe we want to watch, too.”

“You don't.”

“I do!”

“The game is on.”

“Oh. See you.”

Hopper retreats in relief, leaving an only slightly awkward silence behind him. It's a little weird without Mike, but not too bad. Lucas is flicking anchovy bits onto Dustin's pizza when he's not looking, and Eleven and Will are giggling.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Lucas says, arranging his face in a more serious expression. Dustin glares at him suspiciously for a few seconds before breaking eye contact. He glances at Eleven, who is levitating a bottle of soda toward the table. She starts to pour it into glasses.

“Wait!”

She looks up, startled, and sees Dustin breaking into a huge smile. Lucas and Will know that smile. Unfortunately.

“You've never been in a restaurant, have you?”

“Al's.”

Dustin shakes his head. "Nah, that doesn't count. I mean a real restaurant, with waiters and stuff."

Eleven shakes her head. No.

"I didn't think so. And you'll be in a restaurant tomorrow. A fancy restaurant." For Hawkins, anyway.

"What's your point?" Will asks, seeing Eleven's confusion.

"My point is, she'll probably be nervous, being in a new place and everything. Right, El?"

Eleven shrugs. She doesn't know if she will be nervous or not, because she's never been in a restaurant before. Are there a lot of things there to make a person nervous?

"Don't freak her out."

"I'm not freaking her out, I'm just saying we could help."

"How?"

"We could help her practice! So she isn't nervous tomorrow."

"You mean we should all date her tonight, before Mike does?" Lucas asks, and Will cracks up. Dustin gives them both a withering glare.

"No, assholes. We'll just give her the whole restaurant experience, so she's not overwhelmed tomorrow."

Eleven starts to take a bite of her pizza, but Dustin stops her. "No, we haven't given you your order yet."

"It's right here."

"I know, I mean-guys, help me out, here."

"The pizza's getting cold," Lucas snarls, as Dustin gathers up their plates and dumps the slices back into the boxes. Lucas keeps his plate in a death grip until Dustin gives them an obstinate glare and Will sighs.

“Just go with it,” he says, giving up.

“But this is stupid!”

“Whether or not you agree now, you will eventually, so let’s just get it over with.”

Lucas watches his slice disappear back into the box. “You’re a pain in the ass, Henderson.”

“No, I’m not.”

“No?”

“No! I’m being a good friend,” he retorts in a lofty tone.

“Not to me, I’m hungry.”

Dustin ignores him.

“Okay! So we’re going to pretend we’re in a restaurant, okay?”

“But they won’t be there tomorrow.”

“Yeah, but other people will be, so they’ll be acting. Like on TV, right? Those are all actors playing characters.”

“Who am I playing?” Eleven asks. Lucas snorts with laughter and Will kicks him under the table.

“You’ll be you, since you’ll actually be there and you’re the reason we’re practicing,” Will explains patiently.

“Oh. Mike?”

The three guys consider each other carefully.

“One of us has to be Mike.”

They size each other up again.

“Okay, Lucas, you can be the waiter. Will, you’re the host. I’ll be Mike.”

“Why do you get to be Mike?”

“Because this was my idea.”

“That’s not fair, it’s a starring role,” Lucas argues, forgetting his reservations against such a stupid idea in the midst of their usual competitiveness.

“So? You had a speaking role in the school play last year. You had your turn.”

“I had one line!”

“Yeah, but you did have a line.”

“I was a goddamn egg.”

“Neither of you will accept the other one getting the role, and you’re both freaking Eleven out, so I’ll be Mike,” Will interjects. Eleven doesn’t respond, although they aren’t actually freaking her out. True, she doesn’t like arguing, but they aren’t really arguing. Or they are, but that’s just part of Lucas and Dustin. It’s nothing to freak out about.

“How is that fair? You were in the play, too.”

“Yeah, and he had TWO lines. I had ONE.”

“I didn’t get to speak at all!” Then a thought occurs to him. “Actually, fine. You’re right. You only had one line, and you looked really stupid, so you can be Mike.”

Lucas is instantly suspicious. “Why? Why don’t YOU want to be Mike?”

Dustin considers lying but he’s getting really hungry. “Well, Mike might not like, be totally pleased with any of us being Mike.”

“Shit. I don’t want to be Mike. Will, you can be Mike. You’d be the best at it, anyway.”

“I don’t want to be Mike, either,” Will says, thinking of the Christmas

party.

“He got over that! I think he’d be totally fine with it, seeing as we’re helping her and everything.” Dustin jabs a finger at Eleven, who’s helped herself to a slice of pizza while the rest were busy arguing.

“If he’s totally fine with it, then you can be Mike.”

“Great. Now we don’t have a Mike.”

Lucas sighs. “FINE. I’m fucking hungry. I will be Mike.”

“Thank you,” Dustin says, pleased, and totally unaware of the irony.

“Okay. YOU’RE Mike, I’ll be the waiter, Will is the host.”

“Whatever.”

“Okay, places!” Dustin calls. Lucas motions for Eleven to stop eating and she obediently follows him out of the kitchen. Dustin hovers near the fridge, explaining as the scene progresses.

“Okay, El, you’re walking in the restaurant with Mike. A host or hostess will greet you. It’s a host this time, unless you want to expand your range and be a girl?” He directs this question toward Will.

“No, thanks.”

“Okay. And...begin!”

Will rolls his eyes at El before getting into the role. “Hi, how can I help you?”

“Cut!”

“What?”

“That’s a little too informal.”

“Dustin, shut the hell up.”

“Lucas, stay in character.”

Lucas grabs Eleven’s hand again.

“Welcome to Angelo’s, a super fancy restaurant,” Will deadpans, and they giggle. “Can I help you?”

Lucas opens his mouth but Dustin speaks first. “So Mike will tell the host that he has a reservation, which means that he’s already booked a table for you guys, okay?”

Eleven nods, because they actually go on dates a lot on Days of Our Lives. But she stays silent, because she doesn’t want to hurt his feelings.

Lucas glares at Dustin but Dustin keeps his mouth shut so apparently it’s okay for him to speak now. “Reservation for Wheeler,” he says.

“I think Mike would fidget more. Try to be more anxious.”

“Dustin, I swear to God, if you interrupt one more time-“

“Okay, sorry. Jesus.”

Will pretends to check the reservation, using the phone book since it’s the only prop in reach. “Yes, sir. Right this way.” Will extends his hand toward them welcomingly and leads them approximately six inches to the kitchen table.

Lucas pulls a chair out for Eleven. She’s seen this part on TV, too. She sits down and politely thanks him.

“Now, if Mike’s too nervous, he may not think to do that,” Dustin adds helpfully.

“Or the host might do that,” Will says.

“Or no one,” Lucas adds.

“So if you’re just standing there and no one touches your seat, just do it yourself. Okay?”

Eleven nods.

“Your waiter tonight is Dustin, he’ll be right with you to take your order.”

“I think my name should be something else.”

“Who cares? Someone will be here to take your order.” Will gestures toward Dustin, but Dustin doesn’t come over immediately.

“Waiters usually take their time, so that gives you guys some time alone to make awkward conversation.”

Eleven stares at Lucas, waiting. Lucas sighs.

“Let’s see...this is a nice restaurant, isn’t it?”

Eleven glances around the messy kitchen. There are crumbs on the floor from the last time they ordered pizza. She shrugs. Lucas tries not to laugh.

“Well. Mike will probably knock something over at this point, because he’ll be staring at you like an idiot.” Lucas jerks his hands around until he knocks a roll of paper towels onto the floor, while gazing stupidly at Eleven. They crack up briefly, and Eleven doesn’t feel guilty about joining them. She knows they aren’t really making fun of Mike, they are just teasing. Like friends do. Dustin takes the laughter as his cue.

“Welcome to Angelo’s, I’m Dustin. I’ll be your waiter this evening.”

“But you’ll be with us.”

That’s a good point. He forgot about that. Dustin scratches his nose.

“Oh. Right. In that case, I’m Lorenzo and Lorenzo will be your waiter this evening.”

“Lorenzo?”

Dustin ignores the chortling.

“Okay, so waiters in fancy-ass places usually tell you their specials.”

“What are specials?”

“Probably just the food they made too much of and they want to get rid of, to be honest. Anyway, so our specials tonight are lasagna and

that other type of pasta that's kind of like spaghetti but isn't."

"Tortellini," Lucas supplies.

"Right. Thank you, Mr. Wheeler," Dustin intones. "Okay. So if the special sounds good to you, you can order that, but you don't have to, because you'll have a menu. Shit. I need a menu." Will strips a sheet of coupons off one of the pizza boxes and hands it to him. "Here are your menus, sir and madam."

"There's only one."

"Right. I need a menu, too," Lucas teases. "Do you want to lose your tip?"

Dustin sighs and rips the sheet of paper in half. "Happy? Your own special menu."

"Dude. Hopper could have used those coupons."

"Shut up. Anyway, the menu will have everything you could possibly order from the restaurant, so you and Mike will look it over and just decide what you want. Simple. Now, what can I get you to drink?"

Eleven reaches for the bottle of soda and Dustin gently slaps her hand away. "No, the waiter will bring you your drinks. Two sodas?"

"A martini," Lucas says, just to be an ass.

"Two sodas it is." Dustin pours them both a glass.

"Can I have a glass?" Will asks from behind him.

"No. You're on the clock."

They all snicker and Dustin speaks over the outburst. "Now, what would you like to order?"

Eleven looks down at her half of the coupons. \$2.00 off a large pepperoni. She raises her eyebrows at Lucas and he shrugs. She points to the box of pepperoni pizza on the counter.

“Excellent choice, madam. And for you, sir?”

“Dustin.”

“All righty, I’ll have your order out in a minute, but probably more like half an hour so I can talk on the phone or whatever waiters do when they feel like taking it easy.”

Dustin busies himself with plates until he realizes that Lucas and Eleven are both staring at him, totally not in character. He sighs. Maybe he should have been Mike. If you want it done right and all. He clears his throat expectantly and Lucas obediently takes El’s hand, or more like two of her fingers because he figures that won’t piss Mike off very much. Eleven slides her gaze from Dustin to Lucas and Lucas immediately gives her a sappy look.

“Oh, El, I’m so happy to be here with you on our first date. Will you be my girlfriend? Actually, will you just marry me?”

Dustin slams a plate down in front of him, glaring.

“Sorry. I just got carried away. That happens sometimes, when I’m around you.” Lucas bats his eyelashes at Eleven and she laughs again.

At that moment, Hopper walks in for a refill. He takes in the scene, digesting it the same way he’s currently digesting about a pound of Canadian bacon. Will is lurking behind Dustin, Dustin appears to be enraged, and Lucas and Eleven are holding hands and gazing at each other.

“I don’t want to know,” Hopper mumbles, and retreats. He doesn’t really need seconds. He’s on a diet.

Dustin is reading in bed when he remembers something important. Shit. He never called Steve. It’s only...ten after midnight. That’s not too late to call, is it? It’s a Friday night. And Steve is 18. He’s probably wide awake. His fingers hover over the phone while he engages in an internal debate. Steve might be pissed that he’s asking

at the last minute. Maybe he should wait until tomorrow? Although that really would be the last minute, wouldn't it?

He's utterly crushed when he's told that Steve is out.

At midnight.

When Dustin needs him.

"Out? What do you mean, out?"

"He isn't here, Dustin. He'll be home soon."

"How soon?"

"I don't know."

Dustin sighs. Parents these days. "Please tell him to call me the second he comes in. The second. It's an emergency."

"Is everything okay?"

"Well, no one is dying or anything like that. But it's still an emergency."

Dustin hangs up only after extracting her promise to personally ensure that her son calls him back immediately. Then he paces, swearing at the clock every few minutes. It's more enjoyable than swearing at himself for screwing up. And screwing up definitely screws up his vision of himself as a hero for his ingenious plan.

It's five after two when the phone finally rings. Dustin picks it up quickly, hoping his mother didn't hear it. "Where the hell were you?"

"On a date. What's the emergency?"

Dustin is momentarily diverted. "A date? With whom?"

"What's wrong?"

"Any monsters, you mean? Nope. Who was your date?"

"I repeat, what's the emergency?" Steve's starting to segue from

panicked to pissed off, so Dustin decides to investigate this line of questioning at a later date.

“Oh. Um. I kind of need your help tomorrow.”

“With what?” Steve sighs. Prying information out of Dustin can be exhausting even under the best of circumstances, and these are not the best of circumstances.

“Well. Are you busy tomorrow?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On what heinous thing you need me to do.”

“I need your help. With a date. I kind of said that you’d drive and chaperone so there’s a semi-adult present.”

“You have a date? Congrats. Yeah, I guess. Where are you guys going?”

“Actually, it’s more like Mike’s date. With you know who.” Dustin throws Hopper a bone by leaving her name out of the conversation, even though he doesn’t actually think anyone is tapping his phone. Although that would be kind of exciting. Maybe he should come up with some special code words, just in case.

There’s a beat of silence. “You want me to chaperone Mike’s date? Nancy’s brother’s date? Are you freaking kidding me?”

“Um. No. And Hopper said it was okay.”

“I never said it was okay!”

“Um. Sorry. It was kind of last minute, because Hopper said an adult had to be present. So I thought of you.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“And he was cool with it! He thinks you’re totally responsible and

capable of protecting her,” Dustin says, hoping this will stroke his manly ego somehow.

“I’m pretty sure she can protect me much better than I could protect her.”

“Totally.”

A longer silence, and Dustin can almost feel the rejection approaching. “And it’s their first date, a sort of belated Valentine’s thing, so it’s important.”

“To them.”

“Yeah, true, and to me.”

“You don’t even have a date.”

Dustin considers this. “I kind of have a date,” he says, because it’s true. And because Steve will figure it out sooner or later. “Not with a girl, though.”

“Oh. Cool.”

“What?”

“What?”

“I meant you, dumb-ass. You and I will be there, just so other people are present. But we’ll just be hanging out and we’ll leave them alone. And I will owe you. Forever. Anything you want, forever.”

“I don’t know. Why can’t Hopper do it?”

“Seriously? Would you really want Hopper chaperoning if you were them?”

“Hell no. But there’s no one else?”

Dustin debates telling Steve his reasoning. You don’t have a girlfriend so it’s not like you’d have plans, and you don’t seem to have any friends, anyway. Besides us. Is that rude? It sounds rude. And

potentially incorrect, since he did apparently have a date.

“No. And we like, debated for over an hour about it.”

“It would have been nice to have been included in the debate.”

Dustin changes the subject, since that topic’s resolving absolutely nothing. “And you’d win, like massive points with everyone. Including the chief of police.”

“I don’t really plan on breaking the law anytime soon.”

“You say that now, but wait until you need to get rid of a dead body or something.”

Another silence. Dustin sighs.

“Okay. You’ll win massive points with everyone, including Mike’s sister, who will think you are really awesome for helping her brother out.” Maybe that’s a low blow, seeing as how Nancy is completely enamored with Jonathan these days, but it’s true. “And I will owe you for the rest of my existence. And you know who already thinks you’re a hero, but you’ll definitely move up a spot or two on her list.”

“List?”

“Yeah, she keeps a list of her favorite people in the world.”

“I’m one of her favorite people?” Steve’s a little touched. He’s only spoken to her a few times, after all.

“Yep. You’re a favorite with the person who could...well, we all know what she could do. So that’s pretty awesome, right? That could come in handy later, if everything turns to shit again and you need her to save you.”

It’s a fair point.

“What time do you need me tomorrow?”

Eleven wakes up a lot earlier than she usually does. The early bird catches the worm isn't a phrase that's ever used in the Hopper household. They both sleep in as late as possible, Eleven because she doesn't have any formal schooling and Hopper because he's the chief of police and if they really need him, someone will just bang on his door. Eleven usually wakes up around eleven, which she thinks is only fitting. Then she lazes in bed for an hour or so, snuggling her cats. So it's a surprise when she opens her eyes and sees that it's only 9-1-6. And she doesn't feel tired at all. It's really, really surprising. And not just for her. Ranger and Cleric are both staring at her. Cleric has ceased his morning's ablutions and is watching her with one leg raised over his head in an impossible position. Impossible for anyone except cats, and, Eleven supposes, the gymnast from the last movie she watched on TV. She leans over and strokes his head, and he resumes his grooming.

"It's a big day," she tells them. A very big day. An important day, for her. Maybe it's not so surprising that she's woken up early in preparation for it. She isn't completely unaware of Mike's efforts the past few days, because he hasn't had much time to talk on the phone and she's been able to sense his anxiety. He's been very busy getting things ready for their date, and now it's her turn. Her first task of the day (besides breakfast) is simple. She needs money, and she politely requests that Hopper supplies it.

He squints at her from a pile of blankets. He's wrapped up like a burrito. She knows all about burritos, they had Taco Town for lunch a few days ago. He stops squinting long enough to extract a hand from the burrito and pick up the clock next to his bed. Then his hand retreats, along with the clock, back into the blanket burrito. He looks sleepy. Obviously, he's not as excited about the day as she is.

"What do you need money for? Mike will pay, that's what the guy usually does." Although the guy in question is thirteen years old and probably doesn't have any money. Hopper does intend to give her some cash, just in case, but that can wait.

"Flowers."

“What?” He’s gotten pretty good at understanding her train of thought, but it’s not even ten in the morning yet. On a Saturday. One of his precious days off. He usually sleeps in until at least noon on Saturdays. Hopper decides to blame this on Mike Wheeler, too.

“I need flowers.”

“Why?”

Eleven explains with more patience than she feels he deserves, because he’s tired and a little stupid from being tired. “For the date.”

“Oh.” Hopper sits up slightly, seeing that this conversation isn’t going to cease anytime soon. “No, you don’t.”

“I do.” She’s positive about this. The characters on *Days of Our Lives* always go on dates (sometimes when they’re already married, and the dates are with the wife’s long lost sister instead of the wife), and there are always flowers. That means that Mike gets flowers, too.

“No, really. Listen. Sometimes, yeah, you’ll get flowers on a date. But that’s for the girl. The guy gives the flowers, he doesn’t get the flowers. Okay? So you don’t need to buy any flowers.”

That doesn’t seem very fair to Eleven. Flowers are pretty and they smell good, and guys deserve them just as much as girls do. “Mike likes flowers.”

“I like flowers, too, but I wouldn’t really want to get them from a date.”

“Maybe Mike likes flowers more than you do.”

“There are unwritten rules for dating, and I promise you, one of them is that guys don’t get fine. My wallet’s on the dresser.”

Eleven happily opens the wallet and looks at the bills inside. She extracts a hundred dollar bill because she isn’t sure how much flowers cost. Hopefully it’s enough.

“Thank you.”

"Mm-hmm. But you aren't going to the store by yourself. I'll take you in a couple of hours, okay?"

"No. Joyce will take me."

"Joyce?"

"Yes. She's taking me shopping. For something to wear." That reminds her. Clothes cost money, too. "Hopper?"

"My wallet's still on the dresser." He doesn't argue that she already has a dress because while he's not a dating expert, he does remember a thing or two about women. She wore that dress to the Snow Ball, and by female logic, she can never wear it again. Apparently.

"Good night," Eleven tells him politely as she turns the light back off. It's definitely not night anymore, but that's what you say to someone when they're going to sleep.

"What time is Joyce picking you up?"

"Soon."

"How soon?"

"Ten minutes." She watches Hopper hurriedly disentangle himself from the blanket burrito. He throws the closet door open and rifles through the hangers. "You're not tired anymore?"

"Nope. Big day, right, kid?"

Eleven smiles, pleased.

Hopper snags his wallet off the dresser just as Joyce knocks on the door. He opens it and squints again at the depleted bills. He needs a raise. His paycheck doesn't stretch as far as it used to. He takes out a couple of twenties.

"Here," he says, handing them to Eleven. "Just in case. And if you guys want to grab some lunch after. Hey, Joyce."

"Hi, Hop. Sure you don't want to join us?"

“I think I’ll pass.”

Eleven tucks the wad of bills into her pocket with the rest of the cash. Hopper doesn’t miss the envious glance she gives Joyce’s purse. “Maybe you should get one of those, while you’re out,” he says, nodding towards the scuffed purse. Eleven brightens immediately. Nancy carries a purse. Joyce carries a purse. Girls have purses. She’s certain about that. Guys have backpacks, but she’s not as sure of this. Jonathan doesn’t have a backpack, and neither does Hopper. It doesn’t matter, though, because she doesn’t need a backpack. She needs a purse. Purses hold everything you want to bring with you, money, snacks, kittens. She has four kittens, so she needs a bigger purse than Joyce.

She waits expectantly but Hopper shakes his head. “Take it out of the just in case money,” and she nods.

“What kind of dress are you wanting, sweetie?” Joyce asks as they walk toward her car. Eleven shrugs.

“One without bows.” Bows are revolting to boys, she is definitely sure of that from her last shopping expedition. She feels a slight pang because she had a lot of fun with her friends last time, but Dustin told her that Mike would probably need a lot of help. And that’s okay. Joyce is a lot of fun, too, just in a different way. She enjoys shopping with Joyce, knowing that people are watching them together and assuming they’re mother and daughter. It’s a good feeling. Will is very, very lucky to have Joyce for a mother. And he knows it, which makes him even luckier.

It doesn’t take long to find a dress, and Joyce insists on getting her a nice coat, too, because it’s cold outside. “And it goes with your dress, but you can also wear it with jeans.” Eleven already has a coat, but Joyce reminds her that it’s actually Hopper’s old coat and this one looks nicer. Eleven accepts this without argument, but she doesn’t really care much about coats, as long as they keep her warm. She hasn’t forgotten living outside last year. Hopper’s coat is very warm, but it wouldn’t hurt to have an extra one.

She’s a lot more interested in purses, because there are so many of them. In all sorts of colors and sizes. Some of them look a lot like

backpacks, and you wear them across your body instead of under your arm. She likes those a lot, because they're a little bigger, and she briefly explains about the kittens. Joyce keeps a straight face.

"That's true, I think they'd definitely fit, but they'll get bigger when they get older."

"I'll get a bigger purse then."

It's a little harder to keep a straight face, but Joyce gives it her best shot. "Well, mostly we don't carry pets around like that."

That's very disappointing to hear. "Why?"

"Cats usually don't like going places; they'd rather stay at home. And most places don't allow animals, so you wouldn't be able to go into the arcade or the movies with one. Or four. And they'd be scared. They might run away."

"I'd ask them not to."

Joyce smiles at the earnest look on Eleven's face. It's such a child-like thing to say, something Will might have said a few years ago, but she understands her perfectly. "You can do that?" Eleven nods. "Oh. Well, they still wouldn't be happy. They'd much rather wait at home for you."

Eleven can understand that. She likes being where she's most comfortable, too. And it's true she's never seen anyone carry a pet in a purse before, even on TV. But she does lose most of her enthusiasm for the purses. She gets one of the cross-body purses, just in case her kittens ever decide they want to come with her.

Joyce hangs back at the register, letting Eleven pay for the purchases. The cashier makes mindless small-talk and she can tell Eleven's uneasy and anxious. Joyce fights the urge to step forward and help her smooth over any awkwardness, again reminded of her shy youngest son. She's okay. Let her do this. It's good practice.

And she is okay, she's perfectly fine. She waits patiently for her change and puts it in her new purse. "Thank you," she says politely, and the cashier smiles at her and tells her to have a good day. Eleven

repeats the sentiment and makes her way back to Joyce. Her loose change rattles in her purse. Joyce makes a mental note to buy her a wallet, something that completely slipped her mind.

“Was that okay?” Eleven asks her quietly.

“That was perfect,” Joyce answers, and Eleven can see she means it. They smile at each other. “You hungry for lunch?”

Eleven is hungry, and she thinks it’s okay to eat before the restaurant, since that’s hours away. But she doesn’t want to eat in a real restaurant, one with waiters, and she says so. She gives Joyce a look, both anxious and apologetic, afraid of hurting her feelings, but Joyce again understands her perfectly.

“How about we get something to go, and eat with Hopper? Taco Town okay? It’s right next to the florist.”

Taco Town is perfect. She’ll get Hopper a burrito.

Eleven is pleasantly surprised to learn that flowers aren’t very expensive. She could buy a lot of flowers, for everyone on her list, with the hundred dollars from Hopper’s wallet, but it’s not necessary. She only needs flowers for Mike. Joyce gently steers her toward the smaller bouquets, but Eleven is on a mission. She knows what she wants; she just has to find it.

“This one is beautiful,” Joyce says, holding up some yellow and white flowers. Eleven takes a step forward and sniffs them delicately, before backing away.

“No.”

“I think they smell good, a little strong maybe. You don’t like them?”

“I like them, but they aren’t right.” The answer has all of her usual brevity, but she does have the words this time. The words to explain what she wants. She just can’t, because it wouldn’t be right to tell. It’s

private.

“Oh.” Joyce is mystified, and again hangs back, letting Eleven shop. She gives the bouquets only a cursory glance before smelling all of them. Some of them smell terrible. Too strong. She wants something light and clean, and almost gives up because she’s smelled every bouquet in the shop and it’s not here. It’s disappointing. She tells herself it isn’t important, but it is. To her.

The florist gives Joyce a look, and she shrugs, smiling. He knows Joyce, not to talk to but they’ve both lived in Hawkins since they were born and it’s a small town. And Joyce is now well-known because of that horrible business last year. It’s how he knows the girl can’t be her daughter, because she only has sons. She must be a niece. He gives them both a professional smile in return, heaving only an internal sigh. He isn’t a fan of children. Luckily, his shop doesn’t get many of them, except on mother’s day. They invariably break something and they always have an attitude that he sure as heck didn’t have when he was their age.

“Can I help you find something?”

The girl looks up at him hopefully. “Is this all you have?”

Again, he conceals his irritation. “Well now, I have some more in the back, but these are the only ones that are already prepared.”

“Prepared?”

“Put into bouquets. They trim them and arrange different types of flowers to make bouquets,” Joyce adds helpfully. “See?” She points to some tiny white flowers that surround some larger red ones.

“Oh.”

“We do make custom bouquets, however, if you’re looking for a specific type of flower,” he says, and the girl brightens and smiles at him.

“Yes!”

“All righty, what flowers are you wanting?” He doesn’t mind giving

her his best service, because obviously her aunt will be “helping” her pay. Most of the kids that come in here pay in quarters, although on one memorable and aggravating occasion the Henderson boy tried to pay him with comics.

“I don’t know.”

Sam’s professional demeanor cracks, but just the tiniest amount. It’s not even noticeable. He hopes. He tells himself not to be exasperated, because most kids don’t know the names of flowers beyond roses or carnations. Most adults don’t, either.

“That’s okay. What do they look like?”

“I don’t know.”

Another tiny crack. He gives the girl with the dark pixie hair a strained smile, and this time it’s noticeable. Her face falls and she looks sad. She doesn’t throw a fit about it, though. Her face is serious. Too serious for a kid, to be honest. The dark waif eyes coupled with the cautious way she handled the vases thaws him a little.

“Okay, we can figure it out. I guess maybe we’d make some progress if you could tell me what you do know about them? Or are you just looking for something that catches your eye, and these haven’t?” Sam asks, waving his hand at the shelves of arrangements. The girl gives her aunt a pleading expression, but Joyce can’t help her this time even if she wanted to. She doesn’t know what Eleven wants. She settles for giving her an encouraging smile.

“I want a flower,” the girl says slowly. Her speech is as careful as her movements. And that sure as hell isn’t like any kid he’s ever dealt with. “But I don’t know what it looks like. I know what it smells like.”

“Ah.” That makes a little more sense, what with everything from shampoo to air fresheners being floral scented these days. “What does it smell like?”

“Not like these. These smell too much. They smell good, but...”

“Too strong?”

The girl smiles a little, in relief.

“Yes. My flower smells light. Clean. It doesn’t smell as much as these.”

Sam mulls this over. There are a few options he can think of, although it does narrow it down considerably. Most bouquets are made of heavily scented flowers, and only the filler flowers lack scent in comparison. She’s probably looking for one of those.

“Lighter than this?” He pulls a carnation from a display and holds it out. She sniffs it, shaking her head.

“It smells...strong.”

Sam takes a whiff. She’s right. It smells like the roses it was nestled against. He glances toward the door, but Joyce and her niece are his only customers this early in the day. He idly taps his fingers against the carnation before placing it back in the bouquet. He should just tell her he can’t help her. He almost does, but she’s looking up at him and although he doesn’t speak kid, he has no trouble reading her eyes. The trust in them. You can figure this out, they say. I don’t know this but you do. It’s a far cry from the normal kid expression; as if they’ve known and seen it all before they were even born. Or think they have, anyway. It’s one of the many reasons he doesn’t like kids.

“Come on,” he says abruptly, walking behind the counter and opening the door to the back room. Joyce gives him a grateful look but he ignores it. He’s doing this for the kid, maybe the only one that’s never pissed him off.

“Be careful,” he warns, because there are shelves of glass vases and canisters of flowers everywhere. But he didn’t need to warn her, she’s holding herself as still as ever and looking around curiously.

He reaches for the canister of carnations and selects one, wiping it dry before handing it to her. “Try it again, it’ll just smell like a carnation now.”

She sniffs it, shaking her head immediately. “No. Mine smells more like a flower. Cleaner.” It’s an odd way to describe a scent but he

understands it. And it makes sense, if she originally smelled it in a candle. He should know, his wife is nuts for them. They don't make a carnation candle, as far as he knows. Maybe lilac? They have a drawer full of lilac candles at home. But it's not lilac either, although the girl tells him earnestly that she likes the smell of them.

He grabs a canister of multicolored flowers, mostly yellow and pink, with a few white blooms in between them. He hands it to her without bothering to remove any this time, because they have a very faint scent and it will be easier to smell them if they're all together. She lights up with a smile before she even holds them to her nose.

"Yes. That's my flower." And she gives him that trusting, worshipful look again. He can't help beaming at her.

"Those are freesias. Pretty flower, but I don't usually use them except as filler. You want a bouquet of these?"

"Yes. Thank you!"

He trims them, letting her select the primary color.

"Maybe not so many of the pink ones?" Joyce suggests gently, not because Mike will care (he won't) but to save him from the inevitable ribbing he'll get from Dustin and Lucas. Sam looks between them and the girl shrugs. Pink is pretty. Mike will like them.

"Your mom doesn't like pink?"

The girl raises her eyebrows, confused. "My mom?" That raises an unpleasant memory.

"Aren't they for your mom? Her birthday?"

"Oh. No. They're for Mike."

"Mike?"

"Yes. My...date." She almost said Mike again, as in my Mike. Which he is, but this man wouldn't understand that.

"Oh." Sam is mystified. She's a little young for dates, isn't she? He

never dated when he was her age. But that's not his problem. She's a nice kid, a treasure of a kid, but not his responsibility. And it's sort of cute, her going to all this effort (and making him go through the same effort) to pick out some flowers for a boy. Hopefully he's worth the effort, although Sam has his doubts.

Sam rings her up (giving her a discount, officially because he made a bouquet of filler flowers but actually for being both a kid and not an annoyance) and she surprises him by offering him her free hand.

"Thank you," she says again, more seriously this time. He shakes her hand and smiles.

"Anytime. You come back on mother's day and ask for Sam." It will be something to look forward to, a kid that doesn't break anything that day. She smiles at him and he watches them both walk out the door toward Joyce's battered car. A great kid. But he's still glad he'll only have adults for the next couple of months. Most of them are annoying, too, but at least they don't knock anything over.

Sam leisurely sits down behind the counter again and opens a book. He's still got an hour before the lunch rush, mostly harried husbands on their breaks. He's a little startled when the bell jingles before he's even finished a chapter. He tucks a bookmark in between the pages and looks up with a welcoming smile that immediately changes to consternation.

Another kid. Another dark-haired kid, but without the former's patience. This one looks like he could knock over several things before concluding his shopping and in fact almost knocks over a small vase of roses trying to check the price tag printed discreetly on the back. Sam hurries over, not just to offer customer service but to prevent any accidents because the boy is antsy.

"Can I help you?"

"I need some flowers."

Really helpful, Sam thinks, sighing. The boy moves off without a backward look, grabbing a small bouquet wrapped in plastic. At least this transaction will be quick, although not nearly as enjoyable. He

squints at the boy as he inspects the flowers carefully. He's about her age.

"Mike?" He asks idly, not even aware of speaking aloud. The boy turns around immediately and catches his eye.

"Yeah?"

"Nothing," the florist says, and turns back to his book. Mike shrugs. Sometimes old people are weird. Probably just trying to mentally place him. Mike finishes his inspection. He's glad for the extra cash Nancy gave him, because it's absolutely necessary now. The first set of flowers didn't work out so well. They wilted. He didn't realize he was supposed to put them in water like, immediately, last night. Oh, well. It's a little embarrassing but not a big deal, and at least this guy wasn't working last night when he bought the first bouquet. Plus, he has enough for a replacement. And he's a careful, diligent student who learns from his mistakes. He'll put these in water as soon as he gets home.

Eleven empties her new purse of change and gives it to Hopper. He does a double-take at the amount of bills-Jesus Christ, she left with a lot more money than he thought. He really needs to just start giving her an allowance so he can keep his wallet out of sight. Not that she'd steal anything, but obviously she's still a little confused on how much things cost and how much money a hundred dollars is. He gives her some change back, telling her to keep it in her purse and use it if they're strapped for cash at dinner.

She tucks it into the side pocket as Joyce opens the bags of Taco Town. Eleven sets the purse down on the floor and opens it invitingly. The kittens swarm it immediately. They're always interested in anything new. Bard takes a cursory sniff and decides that Taco Town smells better, but Paladin curls up inside for a snooze. Eleven looks at Joyce triumphantly and Hopper glances between them, perplexed.

"Just an inside joke," Joyce tells him, and Hopper grins. They eat lunch and it's nice, almost like having parents. Eleven doesn't miss the way Hopper's eyes linger on Joyce as they eat. She also doesn't miss the way Joyce doesn't return the look. It makes her feel very sorry for Hopper, but it's not surprising. Joyce already had a Mike. And she lost him. It's very sad, but Joyce looks happier these days. She can't imagine ever being happy again if she lost Mike. She's still thinking this over when she realizes that both of the adults are watching her. She raises her eyebrows and Joyce smiles. Repeats the question.

"Getting butterflies yet?"

"Butterflies?"

"That's what people say when they're nervous before a date. That they have butterflies."

"Why?" She likes butterflies, but she doesn't know what that has to do with dates.

"That nervous, fluttery feeling in your stomach. Like butterflies."

"No," Eleven says honestly. She's felt the butterfly feeling before but not now. She's just excited. And impatient. She eats quickly and waits politely until Joyce has finished. Joyce is going to teach her about makeup. Joyce offers to teach Hopper, too, but he makes himself scarce as soon as possible.

Joyce and Eleven position themselves in front of the bathroom mirror. Eleven studies Joyce's movements as she slowly applies eyeshadow and mascara.

"You don't have to wear all of this junk," Joyce says as she wipes off a black smudge of eyeliner. "I usually don't."

Eleven considers the products in front of her. "Not this," she says, poking at the mascara. She doesn't like the way it feels, heavy on her

eyelashes. It makes her eyes water. "Or this." She picks up the eyeliner and returns it to the makeup bag. The eyeliner is worse than the mascara and she doesn't want to feel uncomfortable on her date.

"Good call," Joyce says. "You look better without it, anyway. Most women do, they just don't believe it." Joyce helps her apply eyeshadow and lipstick and blush, which is a funny word for makeup since most people don't like to blush. Eleven's pleased to learn that Joyce is better at makeup than Dustin, Lucas and Will.

Almost as good as Mike.

Joyce removes something called cold cream from the bag. "Okay, here's how you take makeup off before you go to bed. You don't want to fall asleep with makeup on, it's not good for your skin."

"I'm not going to bed yet."

"I know, but I'm going to show you anyway. Then you can reapply your makeup by yourself, and I'll just be here in case you need help." That makes sense to Eleven, who gingerly dabs the cold cream onto her face. She relaxes because it's not cold at all.

"Why do they call it that?"

Joyce is stumped. She's never thought about it before. "I have no idea, actually. Kind of a stupid name, isn't it?"

Eleven is finally ready. It took a few tries with the eyeshadow but she finally got the hang of it. The curling iron is impossible. She understands the theory, but she's mystified on how to curl your own hair. Curling someone else's hair is easier. Joyce's hair looks very nice now. But Joyce is quick to reassure her that she doesn't have to curl her hair before a date, she can wear it however she wants. And her hair is a little curly, anyway.

Then she just waits, sitting carefully on the couch to avoid messing anything up before the date. She has some cat hair on the front of her

dress, but that's okay. She is relaxed and calm and just waiting for the knock on the door. When it happens, she feels a sudden swooping in her stomach and she's perplexed.

Butterflies.

She isn't nervous, but she is: why? She doesn't understand it at all. It's Mike, and Mike makes her feel safe. She was nervous before the Snow Ball, but that was different. That was a surprise for him. And it was in the school. She shouldn't feel nervous at all, but she is. Because it's Mike. Her palms are suddenly sweaty and that's unfortunate because she's stroking Cleric and his fur sticks to her hands. She wipes them absently on the front of her dress and realizes that she's been sitting here since Mike knocked on the door and she should open it.

Hopper's watching her with amusement and sympathy. "You gonna get that? I'm pretty sure it's for you."

Eleven doesn't budge. Hopper's sympathy beats his amusement in a landslide and he takes her gently by the hand. "Come on, we'll get it together." He walks her toward the door but hangs back at the last second. When the knock sounds again, Eleven opens the door. It's just Mike. But it's also Mike. Dating is very confusing.

Mike lights up when he sees her and that makes her feel better. It's the pretty feeling she gets whenever she's with him.

"Hi!"

"Hi."

"You look really beautiful," Mike croaks, turning red. Hopper snorts. Amusement has made a stunning comeback. Mike's blush deepens when he sees Hopper lingering behind Eleven. He hastily thrusts a bouquet of flowers at her, nearly hitting her in the face with them.

"Thank you," she says, pleased. And that reminds her. She turns around and Hopper's there. He accepts the bouquet and hands her another. She passes it to Mike, who avoids Hopper's amused gaze but otherwise doesn't bat an eye.

"Thanks." Mike holds onto them, wondering how to get them in water.

"I'll hang onto them, if you want," Hopper says, and Mike starts to pass the bouquet back to Eleven when he catches a whiff. It's a very familiar smell.

They smell like her soap.

It finally occurs to him that she chose these flowers on purpose, for that express reason, and he blushes again. Eleven smiles at him and nods and passes them back to Hopper, who can't take it anymore. He's standing here holding two bouquets of flowers and watching a couple of teenagers make googly eyes at each other.

"I'll find a vase," he says, hurrying from the room so they don't hear him break into laughter that's so frantic it's almost giggling. He has never giggled before, but he's rapidly learning that there's a first time for everything.

Dustin watches this exchange from the window of Steve's car.

"You didn't get me flowers," he mutters.

"You've got to be shitting me."

Dustin grumbles something else, too low to hear, and Steve closes his eyes and sighs. It's going to be a long night. A very long night.

Dustin watches them walk through the snow toward the idling car and remembers something important. Shit. Mike wasn't there that day, so he doesn't know what he's supposed to do.

Eleven has a coat on over her dress and it's freezing outside. Technically it's below freezing. He rolls down the window.

"What are you doing? You're letting all the warm air out," Steve grumbles, but Dustin ignores him.

"Mike!"

Mike stops walking toward the car and Hopper waits in the doorway,

having composed himself. “What?” Mike screeches in response.

“Did you bring gloves?”

“What?” Mike yells, this time in confusion.

“No glove, no love!” Dustin bugles, hanging out the open window as if they’re miles apart.

And then there’s momentary chaos. Mike is blushing because he actually knows what the phrase means and now Hopper is the one screeching “what?” at the top of his lungs and Eleven is confused because she’s brought her own gloves. It’s cold outside.

“You have to give her your gloves!” Dustin shouts, before Steve yanks him back through the open window. Dustin tumbles back into his seat, whacking his head on the window on his way.

“Ow! What was that for?” His anger quells at the murderous look on Steve’s face.

“Roll up the fucking window,” Steve hisses, and Dustin complies immediately.

By the time Mike and Eleven get in the back seat, Dustin is newly educated and is experiencing his own blush. Shit. How was he supposed to know? It’s not like Steve explained it before. It’s really Steve’s fault for just assuming he would know. Dustin is well-aware of the old saying. Steve is making an ass out of both of them. He waves apologetically at Hopper as Steve backs out of the driveway.

Hopper no longer looks amused.

“Sorry,” Dustin mumbles.

“Shut up,” Mike and Steve say in unison, and that’s fair. Mike’s on a date and Dustin is supposed to be pretending he isn’t even here, anyway. He turns on the radio and gives them the illusion of privacy but that doesn’t work very well, at least not for him, because he can’t hear what they’re saying over the music. He starts to turn it down and Steve shakes his head warningly. Defeated, Dustin slumps in his seat and stares out the window.

“What was that about?” Eleven asks curiously, and Mike blushes again. That just makes her more curious, but he shakes his head. He’s not going to explain it. No freaking way. He takes a deep breath and mentally erases the last few minutes. They never happened. Simple as that. Eleven sees the stubborn look on his face and gives up. Maybe she’ll ask Hopper about it, after.

It’s a long, awkward ride to the restaurant, at least for three of the people in the car. Eleven is content sitting beside Mike. She doesn’t mind the silence. Mike is wracking his brains for something to say but every time he comes up with something, he can almost sense Dustin straining to hear him, which clams him up again.

Great plan, Dustin.

Mike bolts out of the car the instant Steve shuts off the engine, for two reasons. He can’t stand to be in the oppressive silence a second longer. He isn’t sure if it’s his imagination or not, but he feels like Dustin is judging him. Mentally tallying up all of the mistakes he’s making. But what else was he supposed to do? He can’t really strike up a conversation, a date-like conversation, with two extra people listening to every word.

The second reason is simple. He’s determined to be a gentleman. His definition of gentleman comes from hundreds of movies and books and is in no way based on anything he’s actually seen in real life. All he knows is that he’s supposed to bring flowers, open doors, and compliment his date. The latter was easy, because all he said was that she looked beautiful, and that’s true. That’s always true. He doesn’t think the door thing will be difficult, either, which is why he practically leaps from the car in his haste to reach her side.

Eleven and Mike are equally surprised when she opens the door and slides out and he’s just standing there like an idiot, holding out one hand to grab for the door. Eleven glances at his outstretched hand, baffled. Dustin gives him a commiserating look, feeling a little guilty. He forgot to mention the door thing when he was helping her practice. He raises his hands so Mike can see them and clasps them together, jerking his head toward Eleven. Mike gives him a grateful look and takes her hand. It gives him the perfect excuse for being on her side of the car and she looks happy.

Steve's still sitting behind the wheel. He silently counts to himself to give them a decent head start, because he's here now and therefore he's responsible for how well this thing turns out.

Thankfully, Dustin seems to be taking his lead from Steve and just sits there, tapping his fingers against the doorframe.

"Now?"

Eleven and Mike are at the door, and this time Mike successfully opens it for her.

"Now's good."

Eleven steps inside as soon as Mike opens the door, but hangs back a little. She would rather him take the lead, since this is all new for her. She likes new things but she sometimes has trouble with them. New things are scary. She's relieved to see that, while the restaurant is crowded, it's not nearly as crowded as the arcade or the skating rink. And it's much quieter. There's music playing but it's low. It's not overwhelming. And it's not very bright inside, the lights are dim. It doesn't give her any extra anxiety, beyond being in a room full of people. A man approaches them. He must be the host, Eleven thinks. Like Will.

"Mr. Wheeler," the man says courteously, and tips Mike a tiny wink. Mike's just grateful that he's dropped the ridiculous accent.

"Hi."

"Table for two?" He's reaching for the stack of menus when the door opens behind them.

"For four, actually," Mike says, resigned.

"Just for two," Dustin pipes up, and Mike turns around in surprise. "I told you I had a plan," he whispers before beaming at the guy with the menus. "So a table for two for them and a table for two for us. Which technically is four, but not really. If you see what I mean."

He clearly doesn't. "So...?"

“They’re at a table.” Dustin points slowly toward Mike and Eleven in turn, as if the man is simple. Maybe he is. “And we’re at a table.” He points again to himself and Steve. “A different table.”

“Wonderful,” the man says, in a tone that makes it clear he doesn’t actually find it wonderful. Dustin doesn’t think much of his hospitality. Will was a much better host, to be honest.

“Right this way.” And they all obediently follow him, like the Pied Piper. Steve’s inconspicuously scanning the room, hoping like hell no one he knows will see him with a bunch of kids.

“Mr. Wheeler,” Anthony says, stopping near a cozy back booth. His pomposity has returned. Evidently he’s inclined to be charming toward them, either because he feels sorry for Mike or because he still has designs on Nancy. Mike doesn’t really care which at this point. “Is this satisfactory?”

“Yeah. Thanks,” Mike says, sliding into the far side of the booth. He figures Eleven will be more comfortable on the other side, with her back toward most of the customers. He’s familiar with her social anxiety. Eleven mimics him, sitting herself across from him. No need to worry about who is going to help her sit down, because the booth seats don’t move.

Anthony gives them each a menu. “I’ll be right back for your drink order,” he says, and beckons Dustin and Steve to follow him. They don’t get the ostentatious treatment, Dustin notices. Oh well. Dustin takes matters into his own hands and chooses his own booth. Why not? The table is free and he is a paying customer. Or Steve will be. But Dustin’s with him, so it’s the same thing, right?

“Pretend we aren’t here,” Dustin stage-whispers from the booth behind them. It’s the best of both worlds. A compromise. Halfway happy, in Eleven-speak. Mike would prefer they weren’t here at all, and he’d prefer that he sit with them to help facilitate their date. He’s at a different table, but only inches away, so he’s relatively content.

He’s relatively content for less than ten seconds, because Steve grabs him by the arm and pulls him away from his preferred table despite his protests. The waiter hides a smile but Mike doesn’t bother hiding

his relief.

“Another table, please,” Steve says briskly. The waiter nods and points to the other side of the room, where he intended to sit them. “Have fun,” Steve says to the kids as he walks behind Dustin, prodding him forward when necessary.

“For someone who seems really invested in that relationship, you’re kind of a cock-block, man,” Steve says to Dustin, sotto voce. Dustin does a double-take at the crudity of that statement, and Steve prods him forward again.

“Sorry about that,” Mike says to Eleven. She turns to face him, curious.

“Why? It’s funny.”

“It’s only funny for the first million or so times. Then it’s just annoying,” Mike answers, and she smiles.

“Hopper would have said no.”

“That’s true.”

They both watch Dustin from across the room. Dustin’s straining to watch them, although he quickly averts his eyes when he catches Mike’s eye.

“This is driving him crazy,” Mike says.

“He just wants to help.” And Mike can’t help but laugh when she waves happily at Dustin, because Dustin buries his face in his menu again. Eleven giggles.

Mike leans forward, encouraged by their mutual laughter. He intends to say something romantic, because that’s what you do on dates. He doesn’t have the remotest idea of what that will actually entail, but he doesn’t let that discourage him.

Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), Anthony interrupts the moment. “What can I get you to drink?”

“Coke,” Mike says, without looking at the menu, and Eleven echoes him. Hopper’s warned her away from too many sodas since she’s developed quite a sweet tooth, but Hopper isn’t here. And it doesn’t apply to dates, anyway. She’s pretty sure about that.

“Would you care for an appetizer?”

They haven’t even opened their menus yet.

“Um. Maybe a few minutes?”

“Of course. I’ll be right back with your drinks.”

Mike opens his menu. “What sounds good to you?”

Eleven doesn’t bother opening her menu, she leans forward and he turns his toward her so they can both share it. “What’s that?” She points at something. It’s a word she hasn’t seen before. Mike shudders.

“Calamari....uh, squid.” Which doesn’t actually clarify anything for her, and he knows it. Before she can say anything, he elaborates. “Squid is this-”he hesitates briefly “animal in the ocean. It has all of these tentacles, like these long weird arms and it looks really freaky. Like a monster.”

Eleven is appropriately horrified. “People eat that?”

“Apparently.”

“Gross.”

“Yep.”

“What about that?” She points at something else.

“Bruschetta? It’s bread with tomatoes and garlic and stuff on it. It’s okay. It’s like garlic bread for old people.”

“Oh.” There’s a silence. “I like garlic bread.”

“Me too,” he says, but she already knows. He always gets garlic knots

with pizza. “You want to get that?” And she nods. Mike tells Anthony what they want when he brings their drinks and the first step of their dining experience is complete, with no major mishaps.

“I’ll give you a few minutes to look over the menu, Mr. Wheeler. Miss,” he says respectfully, and retreats.

“Why is he doing that?”

“Doing what?”

“Calling you Mr. Wheeler. And being weird.”

“Oh. He wants to date my sister.”

That isn’t surprising to Eleven. A lot of guys want to date Nancy. Or have dated her. “Oh. Have you been here a lot?”

“He goes to school with Nancy. But, yeah. We come here for birthdays and stuff. Special occasions. It’s kind of the only option in town for stuff like that.” And just in case she might misunderstand, he hastily adds, “I’ve never been here with someone I’m not related to. Until now, I mean.” She laughs. She already knows that. And she’s not his cousin anymore, so it’s a true statement.

“I know.”

“Oh. Good.”

There’s a beat of silence, a little awkward for at least one person at the table. Mike can feel eyes boring into him like lasers from across the room but he resists looking. He checks his watch instead, automatically. Shit. That’s rude, it makes it look like he’s bored or something. But it’s just habit because they’ve been waiting for ages for garlic bread and he’s hungry. She doesn’t seem to notice, but then his mind registers the time.

“Hey!”

“What?”

“It’s 7:40.” It sounds a little inane but she gets it. She grins at him.

“Why did you pick that time?” She’s always been curious about this. And they never really talk about the time she was gone.

“It adds up to eleven.” It’s the shortest explanation, and the truest. She smiles again and turns a little pink. He debates satisfying his own curiosity. He hates to think about last year, because he’s not over it yet. He’ll never be completely over it. But he knows it’s healthy to move on, so why not ask?

“When was the first time you heard me?”

“Day 27.”

The Snow Ball.

“Seriously?”

“Yes.”

“How did you know?”

“I didn’t.”

She sees it’s her turn to explain something to him. She thinks it over in her usual careful way before answering. “I didn’t know. It was my first night at Hopper’s. He had to leave, and I forgot to ask if Will was safe. I knew you were safe, and Lucas and Dustin, but not Will.” She pauses. “So I tried to look for him, like I did with the radio. But I used the TV.”

That’s oddly disappointing. “Oh. So you saw me with Will?”

“No.”

Mike waits for her to elaborate, so she complies. “I heard him, and someone else, but then...” She trails off, unsure how to explain the oddness of what happened. “The connection changed. It was... different. I didn’t do it. But I saw you, and heard you calling.”

“I knew it,” Mike breathes, and Eleven raises her eyebrows in surprise.

"I mean, I thought so. I didn't completely trust my instinct, but I felt something. More than once." He's elated and excited but something else, something he tries to bury because he knows why she stayed hidden. He tells himself to let it go, because he's still curious. So is she.

"You didn't call me every night."

"What?"

"You said, I called you every night. But you didn't. You missed one day."

"Oh." Mike remembers. It's hard to forget. And maybe exploring this curiosity now isn't the healthiest thing to do. Maybe it's kind of morbid? Especially on a date. But she's waiting for a response. But what can he say? That's the day I almost gave up? The day I accepted the possibility that you might be dead? That I thought you were dead?

"I was sick," he says, which is the truth, but not the whole truth. And she knows it.

Mike.

We went looking for you. Like we usually did on the weekends. And they told me to give up, because you were dead. They wanted to have a memorial for you. Like a funeral. And I was mad and upset because I thought that maybe they were right. Because...he tries to shield the rest of the sentence but it's too late. Their connection doesn't allow that. Because I knew you wouldn't let me believe something like that, unless you were really gone.

She looks away, guilty and sad, just as the garlic bread makes its appearance.

"Everything okay here?" Anthony asks, because they both seem miserable.

"Yeah."

Anthony doesn't pursue the subject. "Are you ready to order?"

They still haven't looked at the entrees, but considering how long it took to get the appetizer, maybe they should just order. Mike scans his menu quickly.

"Chicken alfredo."

"Very good. And for you, miss?"

"Lasagna." She knows she likes lasagna.

"I'll have that out in a few minutes," Anthony says, and retreats quickly.

I'm sorry.

I know. It's okay.

It isn't. I didn't want to. But I had to keep you safe.

I know. It's okay, it's not your fault.

He speaks aloud to break the connection, because it wasn't her fault, and he doesn't blame her, but it's not completely okay, either. It still hurts. "Besides, deep down I think I knew you were okay. There were times I thought I could like, hear you listening. Or feel you. Something like that. I meant what I said, I never gave up."

She gives him a tentative smile and he's encouraged.

"Also, I had this dream that you were okay."

And she gives him more than a tentative smile, she beams at him.

"I knew it," she says, echoing his earlier words unconsciously.

"You did?"

"It wasn't your dream, it was mine."

"How did you do that? I didn't know you could do that."

"I didn't know, either. I just dreamed I was there, and then you were there, too. I didn't know it was real until I woke up."

Mike gets it. "Nosebleed?"

"Yes."

They grin at each other. It's a little wistful, but only a little. It's in the past. The funniest thing about the past is that it often doesn't remain there, but Mike's not going to let it interfere with their date. Their first real date. They're both here now, and it's not a dream. And she's not going anywhere. Mike will make sure of it. They both will.

But it's definitely time for a change of subject. Unfortunately, his mind is completely blank. What the hell do people talk about on dates? He looks around the room for inspiration but there's no help there, it's just a bunch of people (mostly adults) shoveling food into their mouths. He meets Eleven's gaze and feels a little relieved because she doesn't look bored or upset or anything else that would make him feel like crap. She looks content.

Happy Valentine's day.

Same to you. Although it's kind of belated.

I don't care.

Good. Next year we'll actually do something on Valentine's day, though. I promise.

Neither of them registers the importance of that statement. It's just a given-for both of them-that they'll still be dating at this time next year. They'll still be Mike and Eleven.

What about other days?

Like regular days? Yeah, that too.

No. Holidays.

Oh. I think Valentine's day is the only holiday-if it is a real holiday-for dates and stuff.

How many holidays are there?

Mike thinks it over for a few seconds. Tons. It's different for different countries and religions and stuff, but there are a lot. The next one is Easter.

He interprets her expression easily and elaborates, hitting every major holiday he can think of and describing the typical celebration in detail. He barely notices when his entrée appears before him, although he eats it automatically. It doesn't impede their conversation, because they don't need their mouths for that.

"I don't think it's going well," Steve says, turning back around to face Dustin. He's not invested like Dustin is, but he feels like rewarding him for good behavior. Dustin hasn't spied on them at all in the last ten minutes or so, which must be taking a heroic effort on his part. Dustin glances up from his chicken parmesan and takes a quick peek over Steve's shoulder. He doesn't notice anything amiss.

"What makes you say that?"

"They're just eating in silence." Silence is the trademark sign of a terrible date, either because of sheer boredom or because one or both parties are nauseous from nerves.

Dustin takes another peek. It's true, Mike and Eleven are eating in silence, but their eyes are locked on each other and while it's always amazing, it's nothing he hasn't seen before and it doesn't hold his interest for more than a few seconds.

"They're talking. Trust me."

"Oh...kay." Steve doesn't want to know, and Dustin seems to understand that. He's consulting the dessert menu.

"You want to split something?"

Steve shrugs. "Cheesecake?"

"I knew we were friends for a reason."

Steve smiles before something dawns on him. "Who's paying for this dinner?" Dustin immediately breaks eye contact and Steve sighs before reaching for his wallet. He counts his bills to see if he can

afford dessert. Hell, maybe he can't even afford dinner.

They aren't the only couple contemplating dessert, because Anthony's just brought the menus back. "Are you interested in dessert this evening? Maybe you and your girlfriend would like to split something? I would recommend the chocolate cake; it's a favorite of mine."

Mike turns a little pink and opens his mouth, not to address the question at hand but something else. He's a fraction of a second away from saying she's not my girlfriend, not because he hasn't thought about it and not because he doesn't want her to be exactly that. In fact, he should ask her before Dustin takes matters into his own hands, but he doesn't intend to do it now, so it's instinct to deny it. It's still an embarrassing question and sometimes he can't control his mouth. Even if he would really like to. In any case, he doesn't get the chance to bungle things up for himself, because Eleven speaks up.

"Yes. We'll split it."

Mike forgets about Anthony's existence and his surprised eyes meet Eleven's. His mind asks frantic questions that don't seem to go anywhere but in a circle. Did she just say what he thinks she said? Or was she just saying she wants dessert? Or did she mean that she's his girlfriend? Or-

Yes.

He tries to process this but he can't quite wrap his head around that affirmative, either. Eleven reads the confusion on his face easily. It's not difficult. She's an expert at confusion in social situations. And she doesn't mind elaborating, just like Mike always does when she's the one who doesn't understand something.

Yes, I want chocolate cake.

Oh. Good. Mike tries to put some enthusiasm behind that thought but he's pretty sure it's a little inadequate so he adds, chocolate cake is good.

And I'm your girlfriend.

For a few seconds, he's no longer capable of coherent speech, either verbally or mentally. Then an unpleasant thought dawns on him. Does she know what that actually means? Or is she just thinking she's a girl and she's his friend, therefore-?

Mike.

Yeah?

I know what it means. And she does. Even without the help of Days of Our Lives, she would know. It means more than friends. It's the way Mike missed her when she was gone. The way she missed him. It's the way Mike can read her face, when she can't or won't use actual words. It's the way she can touch his mind, without even trying. It's the reason Mike is first on her list.

Most of all, it's because he is Mike and she is Eleven.

She can tell he gets most of this, even though she didn't mean to send it. He turns red but he's smiling.

Oh. And, completely inanely, but he's past caring, cool.

Cool.

They grin at each other because it's an inside joke. Private. Something just between Mike and Eleven. And just like that, there is a Mike and Eleven.

Officially.

Dustin will be overjoyed.